

LOVE.

—BY—
ABI. S. JACKMAN.

CHAPTER XV.—Continued.

All smiles and happiness? Would she ever feel gay and careless and happy again? she asked herself. Would this cruel, aching pain ever leave her heart, even for a single moment? and to-morrow was her wedding-day.

Did ever any young girl have such a heavy heart on her wedding-day, as she had within her bosom, that fair summer night?

All of those questions darted through her brain, and were answered only by the nightingale's song.

CHAPTER XVI.

"STOP! I FORBID THIS MARRIAGE, FOR THE WOMAN YOU ARE ABOUT TO WED IS MY LAWFUL WIFE!"

It seemed to the heart-sick girl that all hope and happiness died away forever as she sat there beside Lady Ethel, and heard the nightingale sing. To-morrow was her wedding-day. She loved with a strong, passionate love the man she was about to wed, and yet she was not happy. I doubt if in all the world there was a sorer heart than that of Lady Gabrielle Thornydyke, whom so many envied for her youth, wealth and beauty, and above all other things her handsome lover, Sir Lionel Mannville.

She did not speak for some time, but sat with her white face upraised to the clear sky, where the last faint rays of the dying sunlight were reflected, and as she thought of the morrow with a shudder of pain, instead of a thrill of bliss, she seemed to hear that same smooth voice repeating close beside her the words that had haunted her for so long, and she caught her breath with a gasp, for already she could feel the hand of doom clutching at her heart strings, and still the voice went on:

"Mere pangs corrode and consume,
Dead when life dies in the brain;
In the infinite spirit is room
For the pulse of an infinite pain."

She set her teeth tightly together to keep from crying aloud, and wondered in a dull sort of way what the morrow would bring forth. Would it be the day of doom for her, or would fate be kind to her, and let her have her lover, without whose love and tenderness she felt it would be impossible to exist? For something, she could not tell what, whispered to her and told her that Leon Costello was near, and would betray the sorrowful secret that darkened her young life.

"If he does," she said, fiercely to herself, "I will kill myself. As sure as there is a God in heaven, I will take my own life before I will ever listen to words of bitterness and condemnation from either my father's or my lover's lips."

Gentle Lady Ethel did not dream of the storm that was raging in her friend's heart, as she sat with her soft blue eyes fixed upon the crystal waters of the fount, a sad impression about her sweet mouth. The secret that lay hidden within her tender breast, was known to none save herself, and she would have died before she would have betrayed it, for she was a heroine in spite of her timid ways and low voice.

She loved Sir Lionel Mannville, and for years she had loved him, but no one ever dreamed that she cared for him, save as a friend. But even Gabrielle, whose nature was so different from the gentle Lady Ethel—even she did not love Sir Lionel with a stronger, deeper love than that which filled the heart and soul of this golden-haired girl beside her. "Ah, what a hidden mystery is a woman's heart, and of the two fair young girls, sitting there in the dying sunset, I scarcely know which is to be pitied most—the passionate, impulsive Lady Gabrielle, whose love was her very life, or the gentle Lady Ethel, who sacrificed and strangled her love, and was loyal to the friend whom she loved almost as dearly as she did handsome Sir Lionel.

Gabrielle was about to speak, when Lady Ethel stopped her by putting her fingers across her lips.

"Listen," she said, "I thought I heard a voice nearby, repeating a verse from Swinburne. Did you not hear it, Gabrielle dear?"

They both listened intently, and far away and faint, like a voice on some distant shore in a dream, they caught the words:

"My heart swims blind in a sea
That stuns me; swims to and fro,
And gathers to windward and lee
Lamentation, and moaning and woe.

"A broken, an emptied boat,
Sea saps it, winds blow apart,
Sick and adrift and afloat,
The barren waif of a heart."

"Do you hear it, dearest?" Lady Ethel asked. "It sounds like the voice of a wandering soul and one that has suffered. Surely no human voice ever sounded like that before?"

"Do you think it is a spirit?" Gabrielle asked eagerly. "Oh, Ethel! do you think it is a spirit?"

Lady Ethel turned in surprise and looked into the flushed, excited face beside her, and then she answered gravely:

"No, there are no such things as the souls of the departed returning to earth.

I am sure of that, and I think you had better retire early to-night, Gabrielle, if you wish to look bright and charming to-morrow."

"I will," Gabrielle answered, glad to be alone, and she kissed Lady Ethel's fair brow and left her sitting there alone under the waving limes.

As the slight figure, with its crown of bronze hair vanished among the green trees, Lady Ethel's golden head drooped forward until her dimpled chin rested upon her breast, and she sobbed:

"How can I bear it, ah, me, how can I look upon another as his wife when my whole heart and soul belong to him? Oh, Lionel, Lionel, would to God that I had never met you, dear!"

Gabrielle entered her own room, and locking the door carefully after her, threw herself across the bed, and lay there in mute and silent despair.

She did not cry out. Not a tear dimmed the brightness of her eyes, but, oh, what a cruel pain was tearing at her heart! She dreaded the morrow, and yet she feverishly longed for it. Fancy a girl who is young and beautiful dreading her wedding-day when she worships her lover!

"If I can only go through to-morrow and to-morrow night without seeing that hateful face!" she whispered stormily, "I shall be safe! Only let me become my darling's wife, and I can defy that cowardly gypsy!"

A new strength entered her heart, and sitting upright she was herself again, as she murmured:

"I will defy him if he claims me before them all, and if that fails then only one thing awaits me, and that is death! My hand shall be firm and steady, for I must be calm if the worst comes!"

Poor, wretched Gabrielle! she did not mean to sin, but her love was so great, so mighty that she would sin rather than lose her lover, and that night her sleep was as calm and peaceful as though she had never had murder in her heart against Leon Costello.

Morning dawned, fair and beautiful and bright, and when she opened her lovely eyes she remembered that it was her wedding-day.

Her wedding-day! Ah, how the very thought thrilled her through and through. Her heart sang with joy, and she forgot the secret of the past. Never had the sun shone so brightly, the birds sang so gayly, nor the roses seemed so fresh and dewy, and her lover had never looked so noble and handsome as he did on her wedding-morn.

In a few short hours she would be his wife, and they would be far away and happy in each other's love. They would pass the year in quiet, secluded nooks, and in that year a great deal may happen. Surely God must mean that her life should be bright and filled with perfect happiness, she told herself, else why did He allow the sun to shine and the birds to sing on her wedding-day?

Never had Sir Lionel been so tender and loving, so thoughtful of her every wish, as he was during the few hours they were together before she went to her room to robe herself in her bridal dress of pure white.

"God bless you, my darling!" he whispered fondly, "and may our new life always be as happy as this last hour of your maidenhood has been!"

She thought of his words as she stood before her dressing-case and gazed at her own lovely face and form, while Jeanne hovered near, putting the last touches to the perfect toilet.

How divinely beautiful she was in her robes of pure white satin, over which the mist-like veil floated, softening the sheen and glisten of the wonderful fabric; and then her pearls—they were enough to turn the head of any woman, and the frail, dainty orange-blossoms-seamed made by fairy fingers. The pale stars that peeped in at the casement never shed their pallid lustre upon a fairer bride.

Then the bridesmaids fluttered in, visions of pale rose and cream loveliness, and Lady Ethel whispered that all was ready and Sir Lionel was waiting.

The hour had at last arrived, and with a silent prayer that God would forgive and save her from disgrace, beautiful Gabrielle went to her lover's arms.

She was conscious of the low strains of the "wedding march," and she remembered afterward that the air of the spacious drawing-room was heavy with sweetness that made her faint and dizzy, as she took her place beside her lover underneath the great bell of white roses.

She heard the solemn words of the clergyman, and she realized that each word bound her closer to Sir Lionel, and her heart throbbed so loudly that she could hear every beat.

She raised her eyes and glanced toward the open window at the end of the long drawing-room to see what had disturbed the stillness that reigned over all, and, oh, God, she soon knew, for a man's figure leaped in through the casement, and a voice thundered:

"Stop! I forbid this marriage, for the woman you are about to wed is my lawful wife."

CHAPTER XVII.

"THEY ARE SINGING OUT THERE IN THE STARSHINE, THOSE NIGHTINGALES, AND THEY ARE SINGING—MY DEATH REQUIEM."

The blow had fallen at last—the cruel,

merciless blow that would wreck and ruin her young life. No use to try and cheat herself into the belief that she was dreaming, for there he stood before her, the dark-faced, evil gypsy, and he claimed her as his wife. His wife! God pity her, she, the beautiful Lady Gabrielle Thornydyke, standing there in her snowy bridal robes, her brave, handsome lover clasping her hand, while Leon Costello boldly avowed before them all that she was his wife.

Alas! Poor Gabrielle! Her sin—and she had not sinned willfully, either—had found her out, and a mute, silent prayer for God to kill them both, left her lips. Ah, how dear, how unutterably dear, he seemed to her at that moment, when she realized that the end was near.

The crowd of curious faces pressed still closer, and wondering eyes were fastened first upon the pallid face of the fair young bride and then upon the amazed bridegroom. Then they turned to the gypsy and the two somber-robed, veiled figures behind him, who stood like statues of the night itself. Again that hateful, ringing voice broke the silence:

"Stop! I forbid this marriage to go on. The woman who stands beside you is my wife!"

A low murmur of dismay, like the dismal sighing of the night wind among the trees, ran through the throng, and Sir Lionel gazed into the ghastly face of Lady Gabrielle, a sudden pang shooting through his heart, for there was something in that girlish face that told him that a secret lay buried deep within the white breast he had so often kissed.

"Gabrielle, my darling, the man is mad, is he not?" he asked, a ring of agony and piteous entreaty in his voice, his eyes seeking her very soul. "Speak, dear, and tell me it is all a fatal mistake," and yet, even as he uttered the words, he knew that some fearful mystery, as yet unexplained, hung over his darling's life.

Her anguished eyes sought his face—the face that was more to her than all else in the world—and her first lip trembled upon her lips. Dare she utter it? she asked herself in a doubt of agony and despair. She had sworn to die rather than tell her lover the terrible truth, and now, at the last moment, she faltered and was silent. Where were her firm resolutions of a few short days ago? Gone, alas! like the brief dream she had so fondly cherished!

Again she looked into those tender, trusting eyes, and something different from her mad, passionate love filled her heart—something new and tender and holy—and she died in her fair, round throat. No! a thousand times no! She could not utter a falsehood to him. He was far too noble and true. She would tell the truth and let him judge her as he would. He might forgive her, and if he did not, why, all she could do was to die!

She saw them all before her as in a strange, waking dream, and her lips parted in a sorrowful, heart-broken smile such as some suffering saint must have worn in the long ago. Her sweet, white hands were clasped meekly across her bosom, and in a voice that was never forgotten by those who heard it, she answered, and, oh! the hopeless sorrow, the divine patience of that voice!

"It is true! God pity me, it is true!"

There was a moment of awful silence, and then a man's cry of despair and bitter anguish rent the fragrant air:

"Gabrielle, Gabrielle! for God's sake, for my sake, what do you mean, dear? You do not know what you are saying. Merciful Heaven! am I going mad?"

He pressed his hands to his throbbing brow and staggered back like a drunken man, his brain reeling. Oh, it could not be true! it must not! Surely she was insane to utter those words, and he turned to her in sudden desperation, but what he saw in that face caused him to cover his eyes with both hands, a moan bursting from his lips:

"It is true," she said, simply in her low, musical voice; but low as it was, every one in that breathless throng heard it, and they always remembered it. "It is true—I am his wife. The wife of that gypsy."

"Then this marriage cannot go on," said the minister, who stood before them, prayer book in hand, and he vanished in the midst of the lights and flowers.

Long years afterwards when bright eyes had grown dim, and golden tresses had to silver turned, many remembered that strange wedding-night and its sorrowful ending; and beautiful Lady Gabrielle, as she stood there like some suffering saint, was held up as a shining example—as a young girl who could not utter a false hood, even for love's sweet sake.

One by one the guests slipped quietly from the room, and only Lord Thornydyke and Lady Ethel Sommerville remained with Gabrielle and her lover. Those two silent, black-robed forms stood motionless at the side of the gypsy who had claimed Lady Gabrielle as his wife.

And then, for the first time, Lord Thornydyke spoke. Stepping forward, he folded his arms, and looked straight into his daughter's eyes—and, oh, pitying Heaven, what an expression his face did wear! But the young girl did not shrink from him. Her eyes met his—calm, brave, serene.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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